Perimeters, Margins and Borders: A Developing Mosaic

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Introduction

In her book "Finding Beauty in a Broken World," environmental and ecosystems writer Terry Tempest Williams (2008) described the art of creating mosaics. She discussed the process of cutting and placing small colored tiles called tesserae to form the work's images. Cut, color and placement work together to move light across the piece, illuminating and bringing the completed mosaic to life. Intentional, subtle variations in the hue of individual tesserae accent and give depth to the work, often blending to suggest a consistency of color that is not really there. Perception varies depending on the position of the viewer—the mosaic is seen differently up close than from a distance and again differently from varied angles. Spaces between the tesserae contribute to this. In the play of light and definition of images, interstices and irregular edges are as important as the tesserae themselves. In Tempest Williams's words, the "gaps between the tesserae speak their own language," and "there is a perfection in imperfection." Readers are reminded often that "the play of light is the first and last rule of mosaic." (p 5)

These lessons of mosaic are useful in considering the work and experiences of the Regional Studies Association Network's Peripherality, Marginality and Border Issues in Northern Europe (Pemabo) conference on peripheral economies. The conference convened at University Centre of the Westfjords in Ísafjörður, Iceland, September 3-4, 2012, with many attendees extending conference-related activities to include a bus trip on September 5. Conference participants were social scientists from varied disciplines, regions and countries. With one exception, all lived and worked in Europe, mostly Northern Europe. A United States citizen from a large metropolitan university in that country's Southwest, I was the exception and attended as a result of my interest in peripheral, marginal and remote areas and the people who value and inhabit them. More generally, my interests and education are in individual and collective human development and environments that support this development. I was new to the group and new to the area of study.

Conference presentations and discussions centered around three themes: Smart Sustainable Growth in the Periphery, Implicit Interregional Social Contracts, and Current Practice and Research of Peripheral Regions. These themes presented different perspectives from which to view conference discussions, as did the orientations of the social science disciplines that were represented. The location of this gathering in a remote area on the western periphery of Europe made explicit another element, remoteness, for consideration.

As a whole, the conference was composed of smaller elements of varied shapes and hues. Each cast a different light on the work undertaken, and the definite spaces between them were as important as the elements themselves. Some of the conference's most pressing questions formed in the interstices between disciplines and varied units of analysis as findings from one perspective complicated understandings gleaned from another. Necessarily fluid definitions of terms like peripheral, marginal and remote along with the nested character of variable scales of analysis complicated syntheses of research and experience, as described earlier by Danson and de Souza (2012).

The still incomplete mosaic of the conference fits within the growing global mosaic in which it is nested and that helps to create and refine a usable picture of peripheral, marginal, border and remote areas worldwide. These nested mosaics grow in significance as localities, regions, nations and international organizations (i.e., nested scales of action) seek to address issues related to the three themes of the Pemabo conference and to do this in a coordinated manner. Yet, these efforts continue to be complicated by variations between scales of analysis and action, fluid definitions and disciplinary orientations, and by

borders and boundaries. From a perspective now more distant in time and space, the conference mosaic, like its global context, illuminates lessons and questions for consideration by researchers, policy makers and residents of areas considered peripheral, marginal, borderland or remote. Work that refines or transcends these considerations and pursues the associated questions is likely to provide direction for future decisions related to the areas under discussion.

Context Matters

All work related to peripherality, marginality and borders starts from a position on one each of at least three dimensions: unit or scale of analysis, disciplinary orientation of researchers and policy makers (Colini, 2012), and locality (which may include factors such as geography; social norms, values and histories; residents' self-perceptions; possibilities for economic development or decline; transportation, etc.). The position taken on each dimension creates an investigative context for the work and helps determine what questions can be addressed and what understandings, directions and outcomes appear for consideration.

Like the cut of tesserae, different contexts reflect differently on the issue at hand. Sometimes findings that appear contradictory or inconsistent within one context are explained when considered in an investigative context shaped differently by choice of position on one of more of the dimensions above. The interdisciplinary nature of the Pemabo conference afforded opportunity to resolve seemingly inconsistent findings by discussing issues from differing perspectives.

An Example: Social and cultural history and local norms make a difference.

Across Europe and the U.S., a common pattern is found among previously hub communities that become peripheral or marginal: An event increases hardship or limits economic development (e.g., natural disaster, factory or mine closing, redirection of transportation corridors, etc.). Residents begin to leave due to, for example, fear or perceptions of limited opportunity. A diminishing tax base limits options for municipal updating and repairs. Insiders and outsiders begin to think of the community as dying and the decline gathers momentum until the once vibrant community is abandoned. Studies using large data sets at regional units of analysis are helpful in identifying this pattern but cannot explain why a few communities survive disruptive events while others do not. The Pemabo conference demonstrated the value of interdisciplinary discussions and firsthand experience in refining related understandings.

As part of the conference explorations, the staff of University Centre of the Westfjörðs arranged for participants to learn more about the remote Westfjords outside of Ísafjörður, which with a population of about 2,800, is the region‘s urban center. With the modernization of its small fisheries-based economy and the centralization of government, finance, commerce, media, education and culture to the south in Reykjavik, the Westfjords have seen significant out-migration in recent years while the population has mushroomed in and around Reykjavik. National debates continue about the equitable distribution of resources and services across the resultant rural-urban divide (Bjarnason, 2012; Weiss, 2012).

After the first day's workshop sessions, we boarded a bus in wind-driven, horizontal rain and left for two destinations. A long, forked tunnel through the mountains made these destinations accessible from Ísafjörður. At the first stop, we sat on narrow, straight-backed pews in a small, darkening church on the property of a local farmer. The church was the original home church of the bishop for the surrounding area. In the social history of Iceland, the presence of such a church on a farm signified the landowner's position of power, influence and responsibility within the widely dispersed community (Oslund, 2011). The church still serves the community on special occasions. For practical reasons, electricity has not been added to the structure. Evening services are illuminated by candles if necessary.

Our host held our attention easily as he discussed the value and concerns of marginal areas. He had prepared for this discussion and, with work stiffened hands, checked his notes on a folded square of paper as one of our group translated his remarks. His arguments were relevant to our purpose, concise and carefully considered. They supplied new information about the area and the potential social value of the ecology and way of life.

He talked about changes telling us that his sons grew up before construction of the tunnel we had just traveled. They left home for school in Ísafjörður in the fall and came home for the summer. In between, he saw them at Christmas and Easter. Now, he Skype's regularly, unless there is a power outage, with a son and grandsons that live in Denmark. This gentleman's commitment to place was clear and touching,

though not sentimental, when he stated matter-of-factly, “There are things that we know here that are important and should be remembered. They are not known in the same way in other places.” He took seriously his responsibility to pass this knowledge forward.

The second stop was in a small fishing village close to the farm if travelling by boat across the fjord but more distant via the other fork in the road through the tunnel. In this village, we ate dinner in a restaurant that was opened to accommodate our group after its seasonal closing. While rain poured and wind persisted outside, we enjoyed Icelandic hospitality inside. Owners and staff offered choices and generous portions of traditional local foods, graciously served and fairly priced.

Our hosts were willing to make this effort so that we could learn about the needs and character of this area. Like the farmer, the people of the restaurant allowed our group to invade their space and time because they are committed to place and to the success and character of their community and region. They value and enjoy their lives in this remote area and, consistent with Icelandic history and culture, believe that with hard work and determination they will succeed with this place that is theirs. As a result, they appear to be actively engaged in an evolution of place that blends local culture with a changing economy in a changing world.

Earlier that day, conference presentations by two anthropologists (Vallström, 2012; Svensson, 2012) described the negative effects of diminishing populations, limited economic opportunity, and associated derogatory perceptions of place on residents of a small Swedish community. Small group discussions with community members revealed limited hope for or commitment to the survival of their town. The experience of visits to the farm and restaurant seemed inconsistent with not only these findings but also the common experiences of decline in small communities across Europe and the U.S. However, the same two research presentations along with others earlier that day identified, within a closer unit of analysis and the disciplinary orientations of anthropology and education, factors that helped explain why some communities may rally while others slowly fade away.

By incorporating resident’s perceptions of self and place, these studies found that positive perceptions of place, feelings of individual efficacy, and opportunity to contribute to or make a difference in the community were related to the positivity of residents’ outlook, efforts to preserve place and willingness to stay. Further, gender differences were associated both with who stays or leaves and, also, with motivation to pursue, and opportunity to use, advanced education to benefit community development (Edvardsdóttir, 2012; Elíasdóttir, 2012; Svensson, 2012; Vallström,2012).

Together, evening experiences and conference discussions helped refine and extend understandings and suggested a need for multidimensional research and policy decisions that incorporate factors such as age, gender, social perceptions, educational practices and opportunity for community members to direct or contribute to development in their area. Investigative contexts that differ in unit of analysis, disciplinary orientation and locality add dimension to the developing mosaic.
One definition does not fit all—or even one all of the time.

Peripherality, marginality, borders and remoteness are as much matters of definition as location (Larsen, 2003).In addition to creating an investigative context from choices related to unit of analysis, disciplinary orientation and locality, discussions of peripherality, marginality, borders and remoteness also presume variable and comparative definitions of those terms. These definitions are affected by scale of analysis and issues of locality so that areas considered peripheral, marginal, borders or remote from one point of view may not be from another. Marginalized areas are found in the heart of major cities and because periphery is always in relationship to someplace else, the same area can be peripheral and not peripheral simultaneously depending on the context referenced. Suburbs are peripheral to the urban centrebut not to the metropolitan area as a whole. Further, both marginality and peripherality have a way of changing with development over time. The addition of modern transportation corridors to, near or around an area can move that area into or out of peripherality fairly quickly, for example (Stelder, 2012).

Relatedly, problematic issues for these areas can be related to situation-specific definitions that are often more precisely understood from the perspective of local context than from the distance of regional policy and governance. For example, Ísafjörður is only remote when weather comes in or the wind blows strong from the wrong direction making too dangerous either visual flight reference landings (required for this airport) or use of a unidirectional runway that is squeezed between mountain and fjord. At other times, access to the area is reasonably easy and efficient by domestic airline (Weiss, 2012). As with variable investigative contexts, fluidity in definitions makes generalizations difficult, but tailoring definitions to

address situation-specific issues will increase efficiency in clarifying and addressing those issues of concern.

Definition establishes comparison.

Terms used to identify the areas discussed here and throughout the Pemabo conference are comparative by nature. A place can only be peripheral in relationship to someplace else, for example. Typically, comparison of peripheral, marginal and remote areas is to an urban setting along with the associated, assumed standards of progress and life style (Fuduric, 2012). A tendency to focus on elements of these standards that are missing rather than what of value is present in outlying areas creates a deficiency model for them, limits perceptions of value within them and adds to the assumption that the flow of services and resource is largely unidirectional—from the city into outlying areas. As a result, contributions of the peripheral, marginal and remote areas (e.g., ecosystem services, diversity of lifestyle and cultures, open landscapes and working knowledge of local ecosystems) are easily overlooked in balance sheet discussions (see de Souza and Danson, 2012; Vallström, 2012). This seems a serious oversight as the search for sustainable practices grows in global importance and the world population expands.

Problems of definition can be ameliorated by keeping in mind that labels used to identify areas are simply heuristics. The earth is one continuous planet that people divide, evaluate and label for political, socio-cultural, scientific and other reasons (Berg and van Houtum, 2003). It is possible to suspend or transcend these divisions and evaluations in order to address issues of concern. Larsen (2003) demonstrated the utility of this in his discussion of multinational efforts to correct environmental degradation of the Baltic. A regional view that considers urban core, peripheral, marginal, border and remote areas as one nested ecosystem may be useful for some purposes and help to identify areas of added value from outlying areas. The ecosystem services research and, possibly, hedonic economics may be useful in efforts to quantify value.

One solution does not fit all—or even one all of the time.

Urbanization tends to homogenize and control originally diverse landscapes and cultures and even to moderate some seasonal changes (e.g., climate controlled building, salted streets, etc.) through the application of standardized expectations, services and regulations (McDaniel, 2005). In contrast, geographical, cultural and seasonal differences are important in efforts to address issues commonly associated with peripheral, marginal, border and remote areas. As a result, common practices of wide application in urban areas are unlikely to be as consistently effective outside of the city, and given the diversity of outlying areas, effective solutions in one area may not work in another (OECD, 2006).

In developing policy and determining new directions, the mosaic of economic, geographic and social factors at work matters. Interdisciplinary Pemabo conference discussions were helpful in identifying factors likely to confound results, suggesting that broad, transdisciplinary perspectives will be helpful when addressing issues of concern in peripheral, marginal, border and remote areas. The adaptable and inclusive setting of University Centre of the Westfjords supported interdisciplinary collaboration as participants assembled from experiences and research transdisciplinary pictures of peripherality, marginality, borders and remoteness.

Seeing Is Understanding Better

Early on the final day of the Pemabo gathering, most of the workshop participants took a 12 hour trip through the Westfjords to Reykjavik. Even in the rain, the open, mountainous terrain was stunning as we travelled around and above fjords on switch-backed, “improved” gravel and paved roads that narrowed to one lane in some areas. Transitional summer-into-autumn colors and light hinted at what winter must mean in this region and highlighted terrain that changed between rocky slopes, grasslands, mud flats, and rock beaches as the road rose and fell. Sheep, clearly unthinking and oblivious to vehicular dangers, wandered, relaxed and darted across the road unpredictably. In the course of the day, we met a few passenger cars and squeezed past a few large trucks. Stops were scheduled for scenic areas, lunch, coffee, dinner and visits with local business people and town leaders.

At our lunch stop, another restaurant that had closed for the season was reopened to accommodate our group. The restaurant owner/cook provided a generous, serve-yourself lunch and listened to the discussion as we ate. The town’s young, female mayor joined us for lunch, using a PowerPoint presentation in her discussion of the town’s carefully considered efforts to maintain a viable existence. She

discussed her development plans and hopes for the future and described her efforts to attain the town goals.

An early priority for the mayor had been accomplished through a business sponsorship that supported construction of a community swimming pool; she knew her town as an outsider would not. For residents of small Icelandic villages, the swimming pool is as much a gathering place for social interaction as a place for exercise. It is a centerpiece necessary for building and maintaining a viable community. This town is building its own future and appears cautiously hopeful about their chances for success.

Another stop at the curved end of a remote fjord was distant from towns. A portable building or two stood on a long, rock beach damped by cold rain and striped with red seaweed. Large tubes stretched from the shore to ringed pens in the centreof the fjord. This was an organic salmon farm that supplies, among other places, a natural foods supermarket chain, Whole Foods, with fresh organic salmon across the U.S. The business owner met us on the beach and explained that remote but accessible fjords are necessary to meet the organic designation requirements and transportation needs of this operation. For the health of the salmon, the farm must relocate periodically.

Harvested salmon are transported in vats of iced sea water on semi-trailer trucks to Keflavik International Airport (hours distant near Reykjavik) via the same route that we traveled by bus. Fish are then transferred to airplanes for the trip to their final destination. Timely transportation schedules are critical. The magnitude of this undertaking for trucks loaded with sloshing water and salmon is barely comprehensible after traveling this route in a large, sheep-dodging bus. The possibilities for problems seem insurmountable. Yet, at home in Arizona, my son buys his fresh, organic salmon at Whole Foods.

The trip through this remote area expanded understandings of the challenges faced by residents of Westfjords. Talking with the people of these areas deepened appreciation of the resilience, determination, knowledge of the area and just hard work required for success. As a whole, visits to peripheral, marginal and border areas, remote or not, afford insight into the many often unique and always interacting factors involved in the success of these areas. Further, local knowledge of place is valuable; if I intended to build or improve a road through this area, our experienced, skilled and unflappable bus driver would be high on my list of people to consult. He understands in ways unavailable to outsiders the transportation requirements of Westfjords. Local knowledge is important in designing effective policy.
Experience of place suggests value.

The trip suggested other factors of importance, some of which are particularly difficult to quantify: the restorative power of natural landscapes for ecosystems and for people; the power of community, hope and commitment to place; the ability to live in isolation without forgetting the bigger picture of a wider community; the geography of food production, safety and health care (travel to medical facilities is slow at best and not possible in bad weather). All are tesserae in the mosaic of remote areas that are also peripheral, marginal or borderlands.

These areas help conserve diversity of culture and geography, preserve and expand knowledge of place and offer options for lifestyle and changing societal directions. Repeatedly, I was struck by the deep appreciation of landscape, resourcefulness, individuality and determined resilience of the people we met. I did not see the quaint little people detached from a changing world living the ways of days gone by that tourist stereotypes of remote areas might suggest. These were people living their lives in and with the context of place. For me, the trip through Westfjords not only expanded understanding of the challenges and contributions of this region but also strengthened my respect for the knowledge of the people who call it home. Seeing is understanding better.

From The Long View

In early autumn of 2012, a group of social scientists gathered to discuss peripheral, marginal and border areas. They brought research findings and experience in these areas to add to existing knowledge and current thinking about associated, pressing issues faced by nations, communities and individuals. Each piece of information excerpted a unique cut from the bigger topic of attention. Each disciplinary and regional perspective shed its own light on the issues at hand. Variations in investigative contexts, fluid definitions and diversity of places studied made difficult summary and synthesis of information but as conference participants went about the business of exploring relationships between the cuts of information, storylines began to appear across the conference mosaic.

One storyline looked at factors such as hope, negative or positive perception of place, and perceived individual efficacy in the survival and revitalization of communities. Another storyline was concerned with processes that create and extend peripheral and marginal areas. Still another part of the picture was filled in by an overlay of remoteness and the special concerns of areas that are both remote and peripheral, marginal or borders. Storylines such as these developed across disciplines and heuristic labels of place. Uniqueness of places added dimension, confounded generalizations and uniform solutions, and illustrated the need to scale policies at local levels consistent with the OECD (2006) recommendation.

As they wove through the conference mosaic, storylines intersected, revealing interactions across investigative contexts; assessment of an area's value influences decisions regarding transportation corridors or resource distribution that affect, in turn, negative perceptions of place and residents' decision to stay or go. Perspectives that transcend individual storylines reveal several places to intervene in this cycle. Larsen (2003) recommends use of storylines in resolving complex issues. The work of the Pemabo conference corroborates this recommendation.

From the long view, storylines transcend disciplinary and regional cuts of information and underscore the importance of transdisciplinary and transregional perspectives. Increasingly, we understand that storylines assemble across a global mosaic with wide consequence. With this understanding, the ability to shift perspectives between small and large scales grows in significance. Work across varied contexts of investigation and action contributes to the growing mosaic, directing and coloring the story told. In this time of accelerating climate change, expanding population, and escalating violence, we cannot afford to leave gaps in the mosaic by devaluing and abandoning spaces, indigenous knowledge of place, or diversity of landscape and lifestyle. Although the picture is not perfect, hope lies in the imperfection and in efforts to resolve associated conflicts one issue and one place at a time.

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